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ABSTRACT

New technologies have made radical changes in the way work is done. This development has passed by German trade unions anchored traditionally among workers in industrial production and stuck in the old model of the full-time employee with a predictable career and a job for life. Consequently, between 1991-98, about 3 million out of the former 11 million members of German trade unions turned their backs on them. Lack of content, financial losses, and changed general economic conditions has ushered in a consolidation process among trade unions. Several mergers have reduced the 16 unions under the umbrella of the German Trade Union Federation (DGB) to 12, but the decline in union membership has continued. The biggest merger of five trade unions to form the United Services Trade Union (ver.di) is imminent. Its champions say ver.di will take account of changed economic and social general conditions in terms of both content and structure and hope it will attract members from the information technology industry, in which unions have so far been unable to gain a foothold. Young trade union officials and members are following the ver.di merger process with skepticism. They see the merger as a chance to renew the unions but question the ability to change the old hierarchies, decision-making structures, and positions. An image campaign is targeting young people and workers in branches of the future to tell them trade unions are the way of the future. (Fifteen Internet links are listed.) (YLB)

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German trade unions on consolidation course

by

Sabine Pahlke-Grygier

K. Stahl

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Inter Nationes
Kennedyallee 91-103
D-53175 Bonn
Telefon: 02 28 / 88 00
Telex: 8 869 904 inid
Telefax: 88 04 57

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Summary

New technologies have made a radical change to the way we work. But this development long ago passed by German trade unions, anchored traditionally among workers in industrial production and stuck in the old model of the fulltime employee with a predictable career and a job for life. The result: between 1991 and 1998 about three million out of the former eleven million members of German trade unions turned their backs on them.

Lack of content, financial losses and changed general economic conditions, such as the blurring of demarcation lines between industries and branches, ushered in a consolidation process among the trade unions. Several mergers reduced the onetime 16 individual unions under the umbrella of the German Trade Union Federation (DGB) to 12. But the decline in union membership continued.

Now the biggest merger – accompanied by high expectations but also reservations - of five trade unions to form the United Services Trade Union (Vereinigte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft, ver.di, for short, is imminent. The merger is planned to be completed by 2001, when with more than three million members spread across more than 1,000 occupational groups ver.di will be Germany's largest trade union.

Its champions say ver.di will take account of changed economic and social general conditions in terms of both content and structure. Therefore there are hopes that it will attract members from the IT industry, in which the trade unions have so far been unable to gain a foothold.

Young trade union officials and members are following the ver.di merger process with scepticism. True, they see the merger as a chance to renew the unions, but question the ability to change of the old hierarchies, decision-taking structures and positions.

A DM 10 million image campaign initiated by the DGB and realised by advertising professionals is to tell the public the trade unions are now on their way to the future. A particular target group are young people and workers in 'branches of the future'.

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Sabine Pahlke-Grygier is a Berlin-based freelance journalist who specialises in social and labour issues and writes for German daily newspapers, city magazines and professional publications.

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Editor: Klaus Stahl
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1. Changed working world and consolidation process

Power supply companies establish telecommunications firms, and municipal electricity or water utilities are privatised. Industrial concerns known for their manufacture of steel tubes suddenly turn into major mobile telephony network operators. Small Internet service providers become e-commerce giants overnight, and their share prices explode.

New technologies are revolutionising the working world. The digital age calls for flexible working hours, new qualifications, different working relationships and global sphere of action.

Year for year, old job profiles are being remodelled. No fewer than 32 new occupations have emerged in the last three years. More and more jobs in production are disappearing, while the service sector is expanding. It is no longer a matter of course that an office worker's desk is located at his or her company. The PC at their homes or in an external office links them in seconds with their firm, customers and the world at large.

But considerable insecurity goes with the new, flexible working world. Unprotected and low-paid jobs are increasing.

In earlier days, workers could assume they would be employed in the occupations they had learnt for the duration of their working life. But the situation today for those who are beginning or in the middle of their working lives looks very different. No-one knows how much and in which direction the jobs they have learnt will continue to change. Perhaps, at some time, they will be totally superfluous. The only thing that is certain is that continual employment already demands readiness for lifelong learning. Moreover, despite further training and flexible thinking, breaks and changes in careers must always be reckoned with.

The present 12 trade unions, formed under the umbrella of the German Trade Union Federation (DGB) in 1949, have so far found it difficult to deal with the development in the working world. Anchored mainly among industrial workers, the unions focused above all on securing worker codetermination on company supervisory boards, regulating working hours and industrial safety measures, and negotiating industry-wide pay agreements. The trade unions' achievements during their 50-year history in the Federal Republic of Germany in terms of legal provisions such as the Works Constitution Act of 1952 and the

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Codetermination Act of 1976, and their action in negotiating collective agreements on pay and conditions are undisputed.

But on the way to the information and service society the traditional trade unions ran into a crisis. The industrial production sectors, which previously had largely determined the union's strategies for action, increasingly cut back their workforces. And for emerging branches such as the IT industry the unions lacked the vision and concepts to move with the changes in a critical and co-shaping way.

In the public eye – not only from the viewpoint of employers – the DGB and its individual trade unions appeared increasingly as an organisation stuck in antiquated notions and structures that the development in the real working world had passed by. Union members also wanted less of the old-style war-cries than new ideas and approaches. More and more of them left their unions. Trade union membership has declined continuously since 1991. The number of workers organised in the individual DGB unions dropped from 11.8 million at the end of that year to about eight million at the end of 1998.

The losses could not be offset. It is now very difficult to persuade even apprentices to become members of the strictly hierarchically structured unions. In new sectors such as the rapidly developing multimedia branches, the unions were not able to get even a foot in the door. Lack of content, financial losses and not least changed general economic conditions such as the internationalisation of companies and the blurring of traditional demarcation lines between industries and branches ushered in the unions' consolidation process. The restructuring of the unions and falling income from membership dues also called for an organisational reform of the DGB. As part of that reform, the DGB's national presence is to be limited to 12 state representations and reduced from 139 districts to 97 regions.

The merger wave has so far involved eight trade unions. In the 1990s the building industry union (IG Bau-Steine-Erden) and the gardeners', farmers' and forestry workers' union merged to form the building, agricultural and environmental workers' union (IG Bauen-Agrar-Umwelt). And no fewer than three unions joined forces under the umbrella of the mining, chemicals and power industry union (IG Bergbau-Chemie-Energie). These were the chemicals, paper and ceramic industry union, the mining and power industry union, and the leather workers' union. At the turn of the millennium, the wood and plastics industry union

and the textiles and clothing workers' union merged with the powerful engineering workers' union (IG Metall).

The biggest merger of single trade unions is planned for 2001, when five major unions are to form the United Services Trade Union (Vereingte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft – or 'ver.di' for short). The unions cover public service and transport workers (ÖTV), postal workers (DPG), commercial, banking and insurance staff (HBV), media workers (IG Medien) and white-collar salaried staff (DAG). The latter is the only union which is not a member of the DGB. With more than three million members spread across more than 1,000 occupational groups, ver.di will then be Germany's largest trade union.

The mega-merger is aimed at enabling the five unions to face the working world's new challenges. They are to abandon their old roles as 'combat' organisations and take the path to becoming modern service providers. By this means the organisers aim also to recruit members from among new occupational groups such as the IT branches, whose employees have so far been very difficult to organise.

2. Have they missed the boat?

"Trade unions play absolutely no role in my working environment," says Ralf H., a graphic designer in Berlin. However, the 34 year-old, who gained some years' experience in various advertising agencies before going freelance recently, is a member of the media workers' union (IG Medien). "Basically, I now no longer know why."

He joined the trade union right after having completed his studies. "It was a political decision," he says. "For me, the solidarity ideal was an important aspect. But it turned out that even at IG Medien, in which printers, journalists and artists are organised, the various groups also messed around only for themselves. Besides that, I always felt the union people really had no idea about how to handle me and my ideas of a self-determined working life, sometimes employed fulltime, sometimes working as a freelance."

Ralf H. still sees the trade union as a rigid "function organisation" which, "despite some efforts to modernise", clings to the traditional image of the worker. That is, the "family man with regular working hours and a straight-line working life, for whom the union negotiates pay rates". Freelancers who are "used also to sometimes working without a time limit and

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basically have no problems with that" only cause confusion. They "really disturb things". He says he holds on to his union membership despite all that because: "There's still somewhere the hope that the union will finally open up more to new working conditions and tackle the problems of target groups who work under conditions different from the old ones in the industry." But he does not yet believe that the new service sector trade union, ver.di, will fulfil his hopes. "Sheer size alone does not guarantee rethinking," he says. "At present, I'm more afraid that in this mega-trade union no-one will feel they are still properly represented. Besides that, what jars me a lot about the debate on the merger is the wrangling for posts and positions by the officials of the individual unions."

Jürgen G., 45, a public service technician, warns: "If the merger leaves the members' interests by the wayside the new trade union will make itself superfluous for good." He was already an active IG Metall member when an apprentice in the industrial Ruhr area. He was first of all a young members' representative, then a works council member, and is now the public service and transport workers' trade union (ÖTV) representative at his office in Berlin. "A political organisation must continually take a critical look at itself and renew," he says. "But, basically, hardly anything has changed since the 1970s. It was already difficult in earlier times in working for young members and trying to leave well-trodden paths. But if the needs of apprentices, including for more independence and being able to take decisions in their own organisation, are not met, then naturally at some time there will be no more young blood [for the union]."

Like many other public service undertakings, his is also soon to be privatised. "It is precisely during such a process that an active trade union is absolutely important," he says, adding "if it thinks and acts innovatively." The days of a trade union stubbornly saying "no" are over, he notes. "If we want to cope with the restructuring with, if possible, no big setbacks for the employees, we ourselves must develop ideas and suggestions that we can submit to the Board of Directors. But, as earlier, our staff council discussions are still aimed solely at safeguarding the assets we have already won."

The example of Rolf F., a lawyer and journalist, shows that a trade union is necessary in particular at a time of changing working conditions. He worked for two years for a major German publishing company's consumer magazine, whose editorial staff consisted mainly of freelancers. Hardly any of them had an employment contract, and most were paid a monthly lump sum. So they had no claim to holiday or sick pay or protection against unlawful

dismissal. When working conditions worsened after a change of chief editors and more and more of his colleagues were fired at short notice, Rolf F., a specialist in industrial law, formed a works council. The result was that he was given notice.

A labour court judge ruled that the journalist, who as a member of the electoral committee for the works council election was already covered by protection against unfair dismissal according to the Works Constitution Act, was entitled to compensation. The lawyer for the other side, he says, suggested to him that now that the financial issue had been settled "one could well forget that business with the works council election".

Despite his dismissal, the works council election went ahead. Now, the freelance journalists have contracts and work in a secure employer-employee relationship. Rolf F. sums up: "Despite all the criticism of them, trade unions provide security. This is especially so against employers who do not at all observe the rules of game – and such types are not only in the media branch."

3. Polishing up the image

A young man carrying boxes of pizzas walks into the comfortable office of a high-tech firm. He's Rainer, the boss, who's feeding his staff late in the evening. They are fading-in texts. Such as: "Some of the ways we work have certainly changed a lot," he says.

We follow Rainer as he walks through the office. He get a friendly greeting everywhere. He passes an office where a young woman is sitting and crying. Rainer is angry. "Are you still there? I already told you to bugger off." Text: "And some things never change."

The scene is part of a TV commercial. It's a segment of a DM 10 million, 10 months-long campaign by which the DGB aims this year to polish up its dusty public image. "Who's making sure that work will remain human? Who then, if not us? DGB. The Federation of the trade unions." That's one of the slogans developed by advertising professionals in Düsseldorf. With posters nationwide, the presence of modern trade union projects at EXPO 2000 in Hanover, intensified PR work and an advisory hotline, the DGB aims to make its mark, especially among potential new members.

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"For trade unions, marketing was earlier almost a non-event," says communication consultant Gabriele von Camen. "Today it's well-known that you have to go in for target-group marketing, and more and more organisations are doing it." The former PR department head with the DGB's Federal Executive Board dates the trade unions' greater openness towards advertising know-how from the beginning of the 1990s. Declining membership figures, and also the problem of making their trade union content heard amid an ever more diverse media landscape are bringing the unions to change their approach.

The unions' presentations to the public to date have come over as too 'home-made'. Actions were often oriented on only one topic and carried out under pressure to act. "Such one-shot measures have only a limited impact," says von Camen. "To recruit members efficiently you need long-term strategies." They, however, also demand bigger budgets. But to win over new workers, she adds, the trade unions must not only invest money but also "ideals and content". Advertising alone is useless.

"You have to begin with the product," says Michael Schirner, of the same-named Düsseldorf advertising agency. He created for the DGB a campaign titled "My vote for social justice" ahead of the German Federal election in 1998. For the DGB, he says, that means showing that "we are not of yesterday, but think about tomorrow". That in turn means that the DGB makes the change in society and the working world a subject for discussion both internally and externally and works on solutions to problems.

The DGB is still "a bit behind the times", says Rainer Henselek, of the KNSK.BBDO advertising agency in Hamburg, which designed the Social Democratic Party's 1998 election campaign. Above all, he adds, the DGB must abandon its "slogans and sledge-hammer" approach in its arguments. "Advertising agencies look at things through the eyes of the consumer." Taking this angle, the question arises of what people think about trade unions. What can persuade a young woman hairdresser or a software programmer to join one? An SAP programmer is not interested in the trade unions' traditional May Day rallies. But, says Henselek: "At a time of increasing isolation, the basic trade union idea of solidarity is a theme that can arouse interest."

"The sun rises in the East and sinks in the West, and the DGB is against. Against what? Against everything! That's not true. But it's seen so. And in the long run that is fatal." So says Jörg Feller, of the Düsseldorf advertising agency FGK, who developed the current campaign

aimed at giving the DGB a new, more modern image. He believes the DGB's communication to the public has to date not been emotional enough, and its media relations policy too ritualised. This has meant that it has not been able effectively to project its trade union competence to the outside world.

Feller said the DGB's public relations shortcomings over the years were clear during his agency's first internal meeting on the planned image campaign. "It was both astonishing and instructive to see how much some colleagues were against working for the DGB," he said. They had a real dislike for the organisation, although in discussing it they were aware that in principle they were arguing against the representation of their own interests. "For all of them are dependent employees."

In the agency's in-house debate on the issue, it emerged "that the DGB and trade unions in general were seen as preventers and brakemen," Feller said. "The irony is that that's the whole point. That's exactly what trade unions are. And it's a good thing that they are so. Because they hinder the unchecked creativity of the optimisers and fans of lean management. That is indeed good!" But, he added, the unions have so far not got that message across.

Feller says his first approach to the solution is: "That the DGB sees itself as a combat organisation is in order. But it must make it a principle that whenever it is against something it must also say what it is for." The DGB thus would show that it not only opposes, but also can constructively shape things. Feller adds that he has no doubts that the organisation can do that. "We have spoken to extremely clever, open and creative [DGB] people who think much further ahead than some ostensibly visionary companies." But in its communication the organisation must take fresh paths. No-one, and certainly not young people, accepts "empty phrases" any more. That is why the campaign is focusing on the current job situation and problem areas.

The trade unions' often cumbersome decision-taking structures make it difficult to agree on a common communication concept. That applied also to the professionally-created DGB campaign for social justice ahead of the Federal election in 1998. At that time, DGB spokesman Hans Jürgen Alt explained in the organisation's 'einblick' ['insight'] information service: "We have to risk the irritation [of the unions]. When the DGB wishes to say something itself, it is supposed to publish only what the unions believes is absolutely right. But if we want to get into dialogue with people, our communication offer must be able to

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register with them. That means first, attract attention, and second, invite controversy. A poster that pleases everyone is almost as bad as one that nobody likes. The First Commandment of the media society is: Thou shalt not bore."

4. On the way to the mega-trade union with ver.di

The trade unions' consolidation process has not been able to halt the decline in their memberships. On the contrary, the building, agricultural and environmental workers' union lost 11 per cent of its members between 1997 and 1999, and the mining, chemicals and energy industries union 8.8 per cent in the same period.

Now the merger of the five unions to form ver.di is imminent – a step accompanied by both high expectations and reservations and criticism. The merger is aimed not only at taking account of the changed conditions in commerce and industry and society. It is also to eliminate competition between the unions involved. At present, each is wooing independently potential new members in the growth branches of the future, such as the IT industry. With a total membership of more than 3.2 million, ver.di will outrank IG Metall, which has about 2.8 million members, as the most powerful union under the DGB umbrella and the biggest single labour organisation in the world. The question is whether such a large trade union will really be able to represent adequately the interests of hundreds of different occupational groups, or become an unmanoeuvrable 'giant tanker' whose inflexibility makes more members jump ship. To date, union mergers have brought only mass into play. Their members have reacted with further loss of faith. The success of ver.di, too, will depend much less upon its size than whether its members find their individual concerns are still represented by it.

The mega-merger process was kicked off in February 1998 and is due to be completed by 2001. The teachers' and academics' trade union (GEW) was initially on board, but decided in 1999 to remain independent because it feared it would otherwise lose its identity.

The basic structure of the new trade union, which will have a staff of about 5,000, will have three levels – local districts, state districts and national executive – and 13 specialist divisions which are to focus on the concerns of employees in the various industries and branches. The divisions will cover the sectors of financial services, supply and disposal, health and social services, education, science and research, art and culture, telecommunications, IT and data

processing, trade and transport. In addition, structures for women and gender equality policy, young people, senior citizens and the unemployed are to be formed.

Pay policy, whose principles are to be developed by the overall organisation, will essentially be a matter for the specialist divisions. The only exception is the public service, for which a cross-sector division is planned.

The five unions are currently haggling over the budgets for the individual divisions as well as the unions' presence across Germany. At present, the HBV, DAG and IG Medien each have a network of about 50 regional offices and the ÖTV more than 164, which they wish to retain. The level of the unions' national presence will at the end of the day determine whether all specialist divisions can also be represented in all branch offices. This is a major factor by which all present and potential members will measure ver.di.

While on the one hand the structures of the new union are being tinkered with, the project still has to take a substantial hurdle before it can be implemented: the approval of the individual unions' memberships. For ver.di to be founded in 2001, all five unions must show a combined delegate majority of 80 per cent in favour. The height of the hurdles in the individual unions vary. The DAG needs a "yes" vote from at least 75 per cent of its members, the HBV, the DPG postal workers' union and IG Medien need a two-thirds majority, while 50 per cent is sufficient for the ÖTV.

Michael Sommer, deputy chairman of the DPG, was as early as last year very optimistic that the mega-union would come into being. "Ver.di is more than the sum of five trade unions," he said. "It's a major starting signal that we are cutting out the competition between the unions and seeking the real competitive situation: that between us and the employers and companies. We aim to bundle and release our strengths so that we can rearrange trade union policy areas which we have so far not properly got to grips with. That's our big opportunity."

He sees no danger of competition within the DGB, although ver.di will be a trade union combine which could weaken the DGB or even make it superfluous. Sommer's view is that "in that situation the DGB will be more important than before". He says the DGB's core tasks have been defined. "The umbrella organisation is for all trade unions the strong binding force. I see no other."

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Even the powerful IG Metall, which certainly fears a competitor in ver.di, takes the same view. A union paper on the principles of organisational reform of the DGB says: "The DGB is the only authority that can guarantee that demarcation conflicts [between the trade unions] will be argued out more or less according to orderly rules."

DGB chairman Dieter Schulte also does not deny that ever bigger and stronger trade unions could weaken the influence of the umbrella organisation. He told the Frankfurter Allgemeine newspaper that after the founding of ver.di, the DGB would have only eight member unions instead of 12. Each would continue to have only one vote in DGB councils, regardless of the size of their membership. "The DGB," said Schulte, "is and remains the political voice of its member unions." He sees the key areas of the organisation's activities as PR work, European and economic policy, and social and employment policy.

He believes that with the founding of ver.di, the consolidation process and the restructuring of the trade unions will be completed for the foreseeable future. "But I am not a prophet," he adds. "The unions will time and again have to give new answers to the new challenges of a changing business world and society."

5. From permanent opposition to shaping things?

Size alone is not enough. Self-criticism and openness is important for new ideas. That's what young ÖTV officials think. In November 1999 they took the forthcoming founding of ver.di as an opportunity to summarise in a discussion paper their reservations over whether traditional trade union hierarchies, decision-taking structures and positions were really able to change. "We are not writing in the context of our functions," they said, "but on the basis of the knowledge we gain in our daily work."

"We see ver.di as a great opportunity for a new awakening," declared Werner Albrecht, 38, project leader, Communication Strategy, Steffen Kühhirt, 32, the ÖTV's national secretary for Youth Affairs, Frank Steibli, 33, section head for Organisation Development, and Uschi Tamm, 35, an employee in the union's Central Organisation Office. "But," they added, "we fear that some necessary changes will not be made, and that rather it will be decided to 'carry on'. To carry on with the old structures and concepts."

They remind that despite growth in union membership due to German unification, the DGB has lost almost one-third of its members. Entire generations and occupational groups have in the meantime turned their backs on trade unions. The union membership of young people and women comes nowhere near their proportion of the national workforce. In the service sector, only every fifth employee is a trade union member. That threatens the unions with 'ageing'. But developing new areas of trade union work is possible only "if the unions get to grips critically with their self-perception, their image, their social models and the offers resulting from them for their 'new' members".

The young officials note: "We must decide: permanent opposition or shaping things." For them, that means above all the unions accepting new ways of living and working. They say many ver.di "programmers" are still stuck in the industrial era and "do not perceive the new world and its opportunities and challenges". For such people, the "post-modern world is only a transition on the way back to what later will be normal jobs". They cannot imagine "that working flexibly with regard to time and place can in itself be a gain in terms of self-responsibility for customer orders and individual entrepreneurial spirit. A gain in the big 'field of tension' between work and leisure, mobility and family, hobbies and friends." The "idea of a new life culture" has not yet arrived in trade union circles.

The young union officials add that those who define their daily 'bogeymen' on the basis of the fundamental discrepancy of labour and capital obscure their view of their own task of shaping things. And ver.di cannot be built on old ways of thinking and traditional organisational structures. If ver.di is to be and remain Germany's biggest trade union, they say, the structures of the present individual organisations must not be integrated on the basis of the lowest common denominator. "Where what is new" must be visible.

An example of what the young ÖTV people mean by that is a high-grade service offer in line with the new working conditions. "In our view, what will be decisive in future is less the combative gesture, the loud whistles or the obligatory cursing of employers over member satisfaction. Our members see themselves as customers. They will measure us much more strongly than in the past by our offers of solutions, on the ways and means we choose, and on our results."

To meet the needs of the "customers", they say, an effective communication structure would help. So why not establish a service office in the Leipzig main railway station that is open

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daily? Why not set up a call center "so that our customers can express their worries and ask questions around-the-clock?". Why shouldn't those members that are on the move a lot be able to obtain advice via the Internet? "The airline stewardess who e-mails a question from her Frankfurt hotel could dial-up the answer the next evening from her Tokyo accommodation via the World Wide Web."

As their future organisation, the young union officials say they expect from ver.di less populism and more reality, less of a 'cadre' mentality and more openness and dialogue. They point out that, after all, it is they who must shape and bear responsibility for future policy. They want to think ahead and not be the last who "proceed from normal biographies" when people have "already long decided in their working lives for individual solutions such as sabbaticals or part-time work".

They say today's trade unions and their offers and services are "products of the industrial society". They add: "In our view, they no longer have a future in the post-modern world – if they are not developed and complemented". New themes and new services, they point out, could include the "negotiation of fees or minimum pay, the provision of income security in times of job changes, family-care periods or a poor order situation, and agreements on further training and time off for qualification."

6. Development at European level

In the debate on the future of the trade unions, Klaus Wiesehügel, chairman of the building, agricultural and environmental workers' union (IG Bauen-Agrar-Umwelt), has pointed the way to it. "Mergers of trade unions representing non-related branches at national level are not enough to confront globalisation effectively," he wrote in an article for the DGB's 'einblick' information service. In view of the introduction of the European single currency, the euro, freedom of services and the European Single Market, he said he believed it "makes much more sense to build up truly European branch trade unions".

He added that what he termed his "somewhat exaggerated" call derived also from increasing wage-dumping in Europe. "A close coordination of pay policy at European level therefore is indispensable." Since, among other things, vocational training and industrial safety are to be regulated at European level, he summed up: "If we do not want to give up our claim to shape

things, we must develop new forms of organisation. In the long run, national trade unions are not enough."

The step to such a merger is still a vision. But Europewide cooperation of national trade union federations already has a tradition and structure.

Thus, the European Trade Union Federation (ETUF), in which 65 trade union federations of 28 countries, as well as 14 branch unions, cooperate was founded in 1973. Seven federations of five other countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia and Hungary), and the trade union federation of diamond and precious stone workers, have observer status.

The ETUF coordinates 38 interregional trade union councils in which officials from two or three countries each cooperate across borders. In total, the ETUF represents the interests of 58 million members. It is the only European trade union federation which is recognised by the European Union. It perceives itself as a "united trade union with a pluralistic character". The ETUF's work is supported by the European Trade Union Institute, the European Technology Office and the European Trade Union Academy.

The ETUF's goal is to assert worker's rights in the social integration of Europe. The Federation represents trade union interests vis-à-vis the European Commission, Parliament and Council of Ministers. The major results of the joint work are above all the EU directive on the introduction of European works councils (EWCs) and the commitment of the EU member countries to an active employment policy.

The struggle to achieve the setting up of EWCs in companies operating across Europe lasted five years. It was not until the autumn of 1999 that about 30,000 such councils could begin their work in a total of 1,250 companies. In official EU terms, they were empowered by: "The directive of the European Council of Ministers on the appointment of a European Works Council or the creation of a process to inform and hear the workers in companies or corporate groups operating throughout the [European] Community." In detail, that means that companies with a total of at least 1,000 employees and with 150 of them working in at least two EU countries can either set up a European Works Council or a system to listen to workers' concerns.

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Two examples in Germany and France manifest the sense made by cross-border trade union work. First, an EWC prevented a German metalworking company's plan to switch production from Hanover to Italy, which would have meant job losses in Germany and the introduction of weekend work in Italy. Second, an EWC at a French electronics firm ensured that an order acquired by the company's British sales office was to be fulfilled in Britain and not, as planned, in France. The EWC's reasoning: "Whoever acquires also produces."

But the trade unions operate not only within EU structures. Cross-border cooperation exists at many different levels. For instance, following an initial meeting on the subject, the European trade union federations are showing growing interest in a common, coordinated pay policy. Branch trade unions, such as, and for a long time, the German police union (GdP), compare notes on specific problem areas or initiate joint projects.

The unemployment of and jobs for young people in Europe has for years been a central theme of international seminars at the House of Young Trade Unionists in Oberursel, near Frankfurt/Main. Over the course of time, a dense network of contacts with young trade union officials from, for example, Ireland, Spain, France and Poland has been established there. So far as the possibilities of codetermination and the shaping of European structures go, the young people still have a "big deficit", says Birgitt Grieb, head of the training centre. That is why, she adds, contact points for people from different countries must be provided, which offer exchanges, give impetuses and help to initiate concrete projects.

Even the trade unions participate in shaping their European affairs at mostly a "relatively high functionary level", Grieb says. "We bring the debate about Europe to the level of direct encounters with young people in order to motivate them to take part in developments."

In that connection, the center used the opportunity of EXPO 2000 in Hanover to stage a conference near the city on the topic of "Unemployment of and jobs for young people". In addition, 140 participants from eastern and western Europe will come together in September this year to compare notes on the current situation of their job markets, exchange experiences with job creation models and discuss possible trade union approaches to solutions.

IN Press

7. Internet links

www.einblick.dgb.de
This fortnightly trade union information service includes statistics on membership development in individual unions, current news and background material. Links:

www.boeckler.de
The Hans Böckler Foundation is a trade union research institute that examines and publishes its findings on areas such as economic and pay policy, changes in commerce and industry, and the globalisation process.

Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB): www.dgb.de
(German Trade Union Federation)

The German trade unions' umbrella organisation, with currently about eight million members.

IG Bauen-Agrar-Umwelt (IG Bau): www.igbau.de
Occupational groups/branches: The building industry, mobile cement mixer industry, agriculture and forestry, among others. Members: 585,359.

IG Bergbau, Chemie, Energie (IG BCE): www.igbce.de
Occupational groups/branches: The chemicals, coal-mining and plastics industries, among others. Members: 922,783.

Gewerkschaft der Eisenbahner Deutschlands (GdED): www.gded.de
Occupational groups/branches: Train crews, workshop employees, bus drivers, among others. Members: 338,106.

Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft (GEW): www.gew.de
Occupational groups/branches: Teachers at schools and further training institutions, specialists and educationists in social work, employees in higher education and research institutions, among others. Members: 273,787.

Gewerkschaft Handel, Banken und Versicherung (HBV): www.hbv.org
Occupational groups/branches: Retail trade, banking and insurance. Members: 457,720.

IG Medien: www.igmedien.de
Occupational groups/branches: Workers in the media sector, paper and plastics processing, artists and journalists, among others. Members: 179,072.

IG Metall: www.igmetall.de
Occupational groups/branches: Metalworking and electrical and electronics industries, mechanical engineering, the aerospace industry, and the textiles and clothing industry, among others. Members: 2.7 million.

Gewerkschaft Nahrung, Genuss, Gaststätten (NGG): www.gewerkschaft-ngg.de
Occupational groups/branches: Beverages industry, dairy farming and products distribution, and the hotel and restaurant trade, among others. Members: 270,016.

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Gewerkschaft der Polizei (GdP): www.gdp.org
Occupational groups/branches: Police officers, police administration employees and technicians, among others. Members: 190,617.

Gewerkschaft Öffentliche Dienste, Transport und Verkehr (ÖTV): www.oetv.de
Occupational groups/branches: Public services, transport sector, social and public health services, among others. Members: 1.5 million.

Deutsche Postgewerkschaft (DPG): www.dpg.org.de
Occupational groups/branches: Telecommunications, postal services, logistics, Postbank, among others. Members: 457,168.

Deutsche Angestellten-Gewerkschaft (DAG): www.dag.de
The DAG, known as the "white-collar" workers' trade union, will for the first time be a member of the DGB after the founding of ver.di. Occupational groups/branches: Salaried employees in the public, private, commercial and technical sectors. Members: about 480,000.